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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 001399

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2015

TAGS: [PREF PHUM PGOV BG PTER PINR GTIP BG](#)

SUBJECT: ROHINGYAN LINKS TO EXTREMIST GROUPS AND PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A human rights activist briefed poloff about Rohingya refugee connections to Islamic extremist groups and Rohingya patterns of human smuggling. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) Poloff recently met with Chris Lewa, a Belgian who works for Forum Asia in Bangkok and who has worked on Rohingya issues for the past six years. She is a periodic visitor to Bangladesh and has a network of contacts in and out of the UNHCR refugee camps who she believes are reliable observers.

3. (C) Islamic extremist groups continue to operate in Rohingya communities in Teknaf under the guise of humanitarian aid groups, according to Lewa. One such group is the local Shamanita Monabik Uddog, which, she said, is connected to the Saudi-based al-Haramain. Lewa claims that even though the BDG closed down al-Haramain in Bangladesh, they continue to operate through this group.

4. (SBU) According to Lewa, there are now only two Rohingya opposition groups: the moribund Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and the militatnt Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO).

5. (C) ARNO has always been viewed as moderate, even though it had an armed wing, according to Lewa. The leadership of ARNO has also been weakened by the virtual loss of its leader, Nurul Islam, to political aslyum in UK and its chief of staff, who is in and out of jail in Chittagong. Lewa speculated that recent arms caches reportedly recovered by the army in Cox's Bazaar area might be the weapons ARNO hid once their leadership effectively dissolved.

6. (C) Lewa said she knows much less about the RSO but that if any Rohingya group had connections to Islamic extremists, it would be the RSO. She claimed that the RSO has close contacts with the BDR, and the BDG is using them to wipe out the ARNO.

Rohingyan patterns and networks of migration and movement

7. (SBU) Lewa claimed that Rohingya migrants have worked in centers like Mecca and Jeddah since the 1950's, on temporary work permits, and that there are maybe up to 500,000 Rohingyans working and living there and in the UAE now. Lewa described the Hajj period as one when Rohingyans take advantage of the highly-facilitated travel to the Middle East. During this time, Rohingyans in Bangladesh travel to Mecca via Chittagong. Also during this time, a significant number of Rohingyans in Burma illegally come to Bangladesh to take advantage of this travel route. According to Lewa, just one travel agent in Chittagong obtained 400 visas for Rohingyans to travel to Mecca.

8. (SBU) Lewa also said that many Rohingyans are trafficked to South Asia; with many arriving in Karachi via India by road. She estimated around 200,000 Rohingyans live today in Karachi. It is a known fact among Pakistanis, she said, that Biharis and Rohingyans are the main agents of human trafficking in Pakistan. After interviewing 16 women in Pakistan, she said, most Rohingyans seem to go to Pakistan for family reunification; however, many women "disappear" en route, and she estimates up to 60% never make it to their destination. She said the only people providing humanitarian services to Rohingyans in Pakistan are people connected to Jamaat-e-Islami.

THOMAS